Why the US and capitalism in general still can’t offer solutions to reduce greenhouse gas emissions

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On Earth, we avoid getting frozen stiff at night because greenhouse gases in the atmosphere trap the heat, gained from the sun’s rays, that otherwise would escape to outer space. So, greenhouse gases are good for us, but when there is too much of them in the air, we get an over-heating problem. And this is exactly where we are headed since the past two hundred years or so. Global average temperatures have been rising thanks to spiraling amounts of greenhouse gases emitted from industrialised countries burning fossil fuels.

And this problem is not just going to go away overnight if industrialised countries switch greenhouse gas emissions off. These gases, like carbon dioxide and nitrous oxides, can stay in the atmosphere for at least a century. Even if emissions are slowed or even halted, it will be several generations before global warming trends can even level off. The consequences are already obvious, with increasingly devastating extreme weather, large regions drying up (the US southwest, for example), sea levels rising in many coastal areas, pathogens spreading (what is West Nile Virus doing in northern Wisconsin and New York?), to name just a few life-threatenting problems.

All of these globally reaching horrors are largely due to burning fossil fuels, and mostly in a minority of countries. The US bears the main responsibility, with 4% of the world’s population accounting for 20% of the global greenhouse gas emissions. It has been way ahead of the rest as the largest historical contributor, emitting 29% of the world’s accumulating total since 1850. And the US keeps piling up more, not less greenhouse gases in the atmosphere. Total US emissions have grown by 14% between 1990 and 2008 and only an economic downturn has more recently lessened the trend. This is an overwhelming environmental impact by a single country with a small percentage of the global population.

And yet things could be different. The US is also the most powerful country on this planet. Highly industrialised, it makes up 21% of the world market, which is worth about 14 trillion dollars. This is more than the total worth of the next three contenders’ markets put together (Jaspan, China, and Germany). The US is most absolutely the wealthiest country in the world, so what makes it so hard for this country to get alternative technologies going and to shift to a fossil-fuel free economy (never mind reducing consumption)?

The short answer is that you can’t solve a problem by using the tools that cause it. A capitalist economy is based on the profit-driven endless production of goods and services (“economic growth”) on the basis of an essentially finite amount of energy and material resources. Profit-making generally rests on fossil fuels and therefore on the relentless emission of greenhouse gases. To expect that the US, the largest capitalist economy, could successfully phase out fossil fuels is like dreaming that corporations will redistribute their profits to the rest of society so that everyone can have a decent life.

But there is more to a capitalist society that hampers any meaningful effort at lowering greenhouse gas emissions. This drive for infinite production and consumption is founded on capitalists having taken control of the means of life (energy resources, land, increasingly water, etc.) and the rest having become dependent on the capitalists' wages to get even their basic needs fulfilled. This gives enormous political leverage to capitalists because governments have to be mindful of what capitalists decide to do with their assets. Capitalists can make or break entire economies and raise or destroy people's living standards just by deciding to invest more in one or another industry or currency, for example. Capitalism is an anti-democratic system at its core.

And capitalism is worldwide. It permeates all governments and now basically all societies, with few exceptions. The most powerful governments tend to be associated with economies where the highest amounts of fossil fuels are consumed and where energy resources and related technologies are monopolised by a few giant corporations whose interests are against lowering greenhouse gas emissions. And since all these businesses are actively protected by their governments and are in competition with each other for global market share, it is small wonder that it is so difficult to get any international agreements on greenhouse gas emissions. At stake is a redistribution of energy consumption that is the basis of huge wealth inequalities across the planet.

There are also aspects specific to the US that prevent necessary cuts in greenhouse gas emissions in the historically largest emitting country. The US Department of Defence is the biggest buyer of fossil fuels in the world. Certainly, much fossil fuel energy is used up in making war and in maintaining a military presence in many countries as bases and patrolling warships. US military might is dependent on fossil fuels.

Then there is the business side, which also makes money by selling fossil fuels or related by-products to the US government. Three of the world's 20 largest corporations from the US are oil companies (Exon Mobil, Chevron, and Conoco Phillips). The other US giants rely heavily on fossil-fuel products, by-produtcs, or investments (General Motors, Daimler-Chrysler, Ford, Wal-Mart, Bank of America, General Electric, etc.). These are businesses making hundreds of billions of dollars a year, with large pools of funds available to lobby (bribe) politicians, finance political campaigns, and buy off scientists to disinform the public.

And the disinformation campaign has worked quite well. According to a recent Gallup poll, 41% of Americans find the problem of global warming to be exaggerated and only 28% think the problem is underestimated. Places where giant fossil-fuel and allied industries have overwhelming political power also tend to be where mass disinformation prevails about global warming and where state policies largely conform to corporate demands.

With such corporate and government interests at stake and with so much effort at influencing public perceptions, it should be no big revelation that it is so hard to pass even the mildest bill on greenhouse gas emissions. Witness the recent Waxman-Markey Bill passed in the US Congress (American Clean Energy and Security Act, H.R. 2454). Its stated aims are to curtail emissions to below 2005 levels, which actually represent a 16% increase over 1990 emissions (never mind the loopholes for the mining industry, "clean" coal, food-shortage inducing biofuels, etc.). Not even such a shoddy bill got passed, in the end, even if it effectively makes a joke of the Kyoto Protocol, which asks for reductions to below 1990 levels.

Yet even more obviously favourable to corporate fossil-fuel profits is the Obama government's cavalier policy on offshore drilling, allowing it to continue just after possibly the worst oil spill in history, in the Gulf of Mexico. This is not even to mention the hundreds of billions of dollars in subsidies and tax breaks (even enshrined into tax code) for fossil-fuel businesses, compared to a paltry 12 billion or so for renewable energy. Then there is the yearly hundreds of billions of dollars devoted to the invasion and occupation of Afghanistan and Iraq. And it just so happens that Afghanistan is central to the burgeoning network of Central Asian natural gas pipelines and that Iraq has the second-largest oil reserves in the world and with a constitution recently modified to allow corporate oil company control over that oil. All rather curious coincidences. One could go on with many other examples.

Above, I described how the US is a capitalist country with the largest historical greenhouse gas emisions, in spite of having a tiny fraction of the world's population. I argued that the US is unable to lower emissions because it is up to its ears in fossil-fuel dependence. There are simply too many powerful interests at stake, both from within the government and the largest corporations. Corporate profits and government revenues rely on a steady flow of fossil fuels.

It could be objected that all that is required is just to make alternative technologies more profitable. Change the technology with the help of market and government incentives, and you get less emissions. If it were that simple, this would have already happened by now. After all, alternative energy technologies have been available for decades (such as hydrogen fuels, solar panels, etc.) if not centuries (such as focusing light beams). Some technologies, in fact, are dirt cheap, like small-scale dams and wind mills, solar ovens, and organic farming reliant on human and animal energy instead of energy-guzzling machinery. The trouble is that these solutions are not money-makers. They are not geared for endlessly increasing production and profits. And – a capitalist's nightmare – they require everyone getting access to land, rivers, and other resources, which property owners are hardly going to give up any time soon.

Something else is hindering the necessary technological shift to lower greenhouse gas emissions. What that something is has nothing to do with technology and everything to do with struggles over who gets to control what piece of the economy and resources used to run it. Historically, there has been a tendency for capitalists and governments to privilege easily transportable raw materials containing the highest amounts of energy per unit volume, like fossil fuels. So they have steadily formed the backbone of the capitalist world economy (first coal, then oil and natural gas).

However, were it just a technical matter of energy per unit volume, renewable energy would have taken over long ago. Yearly, the total solar energy reaching the earth is about 10 times the total energy stored in all coal reserves, or one million billion (10^{15}) barrels of crude oil. In comparison, current annual world oil production hovers near a meagre 27 billion barrels per year. So the problem is not really due to any superior characteristics of fossil fuels.

The problem is not technical, it is social. In capitalism, the tendency is for businesses that become predominant to monopolise economic sectors like energy. To gain wealth and stay profitable, a business owner must constantly vie to increase asset values (pay workers less and less) and to influence government to secure protection from rival businesses and from organised workers (little to no welfare for workers, corporate subsidies, laws undermining unions, defence of private property, etc.). In other words, the last thing business owners really want is competitition from rival companies. And democracy in the workplace could not be further from their minds. Any threat to established monopolies is typically crushed by a combination of state intervention, such as poreferential contracts and anti-strike laws, and market means, like out-producing or out-pricing smaller rival companies or buying up rival companies and driving them to bankruptcy. Establishing a monopoly avoids competitive pressures within a country, but not necessarily in the world market, so governments are often at loggerheads when their respective private or state sector monopoly firms are competing against each other.

To solve the greenhouse emissions problem, the means of life must be brought under people's democratic control. In a situation like the US, where mass disinformation prevails, just getting people to face up to the severity of the problem and to acknowledge the US's primary role in raising greenhouse gas levels would be already a big step forward. But until the hundreds of thousands at the forefront of environmental struggles focus on breaking up corporate economic power, it is highly unlikely that the US will take a leading role in reducing greenhouse gas emissions.

With an understanding of the foundations of wealth and power in industrialised countries like the US, it will be little surprise that the most cutting-edge policies on greenhouse gas emissions are coming from countries like Ecuador. This is a country where 90% of the population is at least partially Indigenous and there still exist societies (even if under threat of extinction) with no use for fossil fuels, money, or private property. There, since 2008, the "rights of nature" have been enshrined into the very constitution of the country, the first government in the world to do so. It is also where major innovations in greenhouse gas emission reduction policies are being introduced (such as the 2009 Yasuní-ITT Initiative). There are certainly many problems and contradictions in what is developing in Ecuador (a dollarised economy), but most of what has been achieved in even the most sensitised of European Union countries pales in comparison.